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CULTURE

London's First Christmas Tree

BY NITEHAWK — 2024-12-24



Ian Fleming¹, the renowned creator of James Bond, had an unexpected start in naval intelligence during World War II. In 1939, Fleming was invited to join the British Naval Intelligence Division², despite having no prior experience in the field. With his charisma, influential connections, and an innate knack for organization, Fleming quickly proved his worth. Before long, he was promoted to the rank of Commander³, granting him access to some of the most sensitive intelligence operations of the time.

In December 1942, a Norwegian agent named *Mons Urangsvåg* arrived in London under perilous circumstances. Recognising the risks the agent had faced, Fleming decided to honour him with a special evening. Fleming, along with a small group, arranged for a rare luxury meal at the Savoy—a remarkable gesture given the wartime shortages and rationing in London.

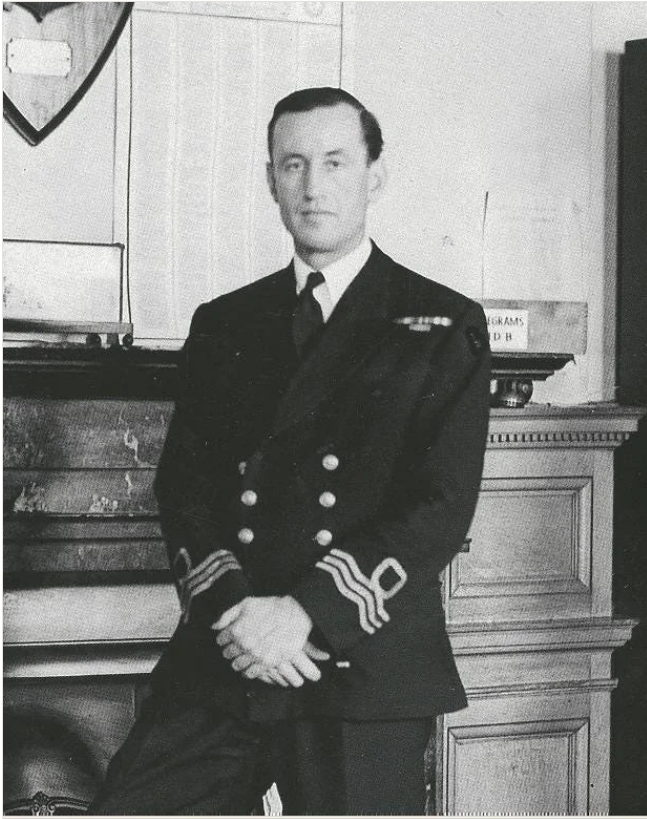
As the evening progressed, the group noticed something unusual among Urangsvåg's belongings: two Norwegian

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian_Fleming

²[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naval_Intelligence_Division_\(United_Kingdom\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naval_Intelligence_Division_(United_Kingdom))

³<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commander>

spruce trees. These were no ordinary trees. Urangsvåg had felled them from the grounds of King Haakon VII⁴'s palace on the island of Hisøy and brought them to London. His plan was to present one tree to King Haakon himself, who had been living in exile near Windsor, Berkshire, since the Nazi invasion of Norway in 1940. King Haakon, refusing to abdicate, had become a symbol of Norwegian resistance.



Ian Fleming



King Haakon VII

The origins of what happened next are disputed. Some accounts suggest that it was King Haakon who proposed a bold gesture: displaying one of the spruces in Trafalgar Square as a symbol of gratitude and solidarity. Other reports credit Ian Fleming with the idea, seeing it as a way to uplift spirits and underscore the enduring bond between Norway and Britain during the war. Regardless of who suggested it, the plan was set in motion.

Using two jeeps, the group transported the tree to Trafalgar Square⁵. Once there, the tree was erected and illuminated, not with the fairy lights we see today, but with wartime flares, lending a dramatic and poignant glow to the scene. This marked London's first Christmas tree in Trafalgar Square, a gesture that resonated deeply with both Londoners and Norwegians alike.

King Haakon remained deeply involved in rallying Norwegian resistance during his five years in exile. After the defeat of Germany, he returned to Norway in June 1945, greeted as a hero by his people. Since new documents came to life Westminster council⁶ are considering updating their history to include him.

The tradition that began during the war continued to evolve. In 1947, as a gesture of gratitude for Britain's assistance during the war, Norway gifted a magnificent spruce tree to London. Since then, every year, a Norwegian spruce has been displayed in Trafalgar Square, marking the start of London's festive season. Decorated with traditional Norwegian white string lights, the tree serves as a timeless symbol of friendship and shared resilience. So far Norway has gifted 77 trees including this year's tree.

⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haakon_VII

⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trafalgar_Square

⁶https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westminster_City_Council



What remains clear is the lasting impact of this wartime gesture. The myth, whether fully accurate or not, continues to captivate imaginations and adds a layer of mystique to a cherished holiday tradition.